

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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AT 1:20 IN THE afternoon I phoned Stevenson High School and got through to Principal Morrison.

I spoke through the handkerchief over the mouthpiece. "This is no joke. A bomb is going to explode in your school in fifteen minutes."

There were a few seconds of silence on the other end of the line and then Morrison's angry voice demanded, "Who is this?"

"Never mind that. I'm not fooling this time. A bomb is going off in fifteen minutes."

And then I hung up.

I left the gas station, crossed the street, and returned to the main police station. I took the elevator to the third floor.

My partner, Pete Torgeson, was on the phone when I entered the squad room.

He looked up. "Stevenson High School just got another one of those calls, Jim. Morrison is having the school evacuated again."

"Did you get the bomb squad?"

"I'm doing that right now." He dialed and completed the call to

THE THIRD CALL

by Jack Ritchie

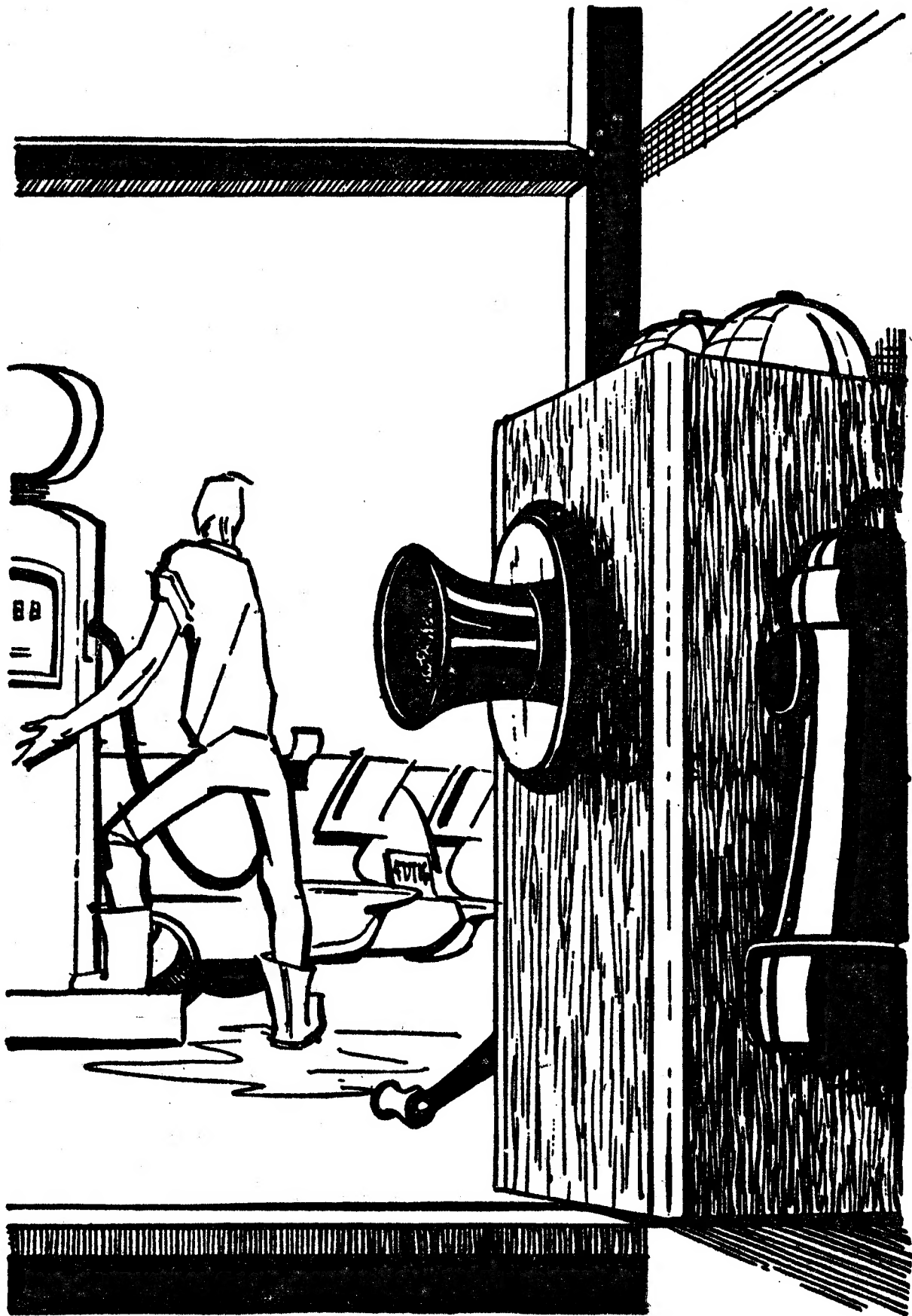
room 121, giving them details.

The enrollment at Stevenson was 1800 and all the students were out of the building by the time we arrived. Their teachers, following the instructions we had given them the last two times the school had received phone calls, were keeping them at least two hundred feet away from the building.

Principal Morrison was a large

Policemen who make threatening telephone calls should be carefully watched by policemen who don't. Even the latter require some benign surveillance, and this should be forthcoming from the Police Commissioner, who, in turn, is under the suspicious eye of the Mayor—who, of course, can do no wrong.

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graying man wearing rimless glasses. He left the group of teachers at the curb and came forward. "The call came at exactly 1:20," he said.

The bomb unit truck and a couple of squad cars pulled up behind our car.

My son Dave lounged against the wire fence with a half a dozen of his buddies. He waved. "What is it, Dad? Another bomb scare?"

I nodded. "And let's hope it's nothing more than a scare this time, too."

Dave grinned. "I don't mind a bit. We were just going to have a history exam."

Morrison shook his head. "I'm afraid that most of the students regard this as nothing more than a welcome break in the routine."

Several more details of men arrived from headquarters and we began searching the building. We finished the job at 2:30 and I went back to Morrison. "It was another hoax. We didn't find a thing."

Morrison ordered the students back to their classes and then took Torgeson and me to his office.

"Did you recognize the voice?" Torgeson asked.

Morrison sat down at his desk. "No. It was muffled and indistinct, just as before. But it was a male voice. That much I'm certain about." He sighed. "I'm having the

attendance records checked right away. Are you sure it's one of the students?"

"In cases like this, it usually is," Pete said. "A boy decides he hates one of the teachers or the whole school because he's getting bad marks. So he uses this way to get what he thinks is revenge. Or maybe he just thinks the whole thing is a roaring joke."

The attendance records were brought to Morrison. He glanced at them and then passed them over to us. "Ninety-one absences. About average."

Pete and I went over the names of the absent students. I knew that Bob Fletcher would be there, but that didn't matter. I hoped that Lester Baines had come back to school in the afternoon.

"Fletcher's here," Pete said. "But he's out, of course." His eyes went back to the list. "And Lester Baines was absent." He ran down the rest of the names and then looked up and smiled. "Just Lester Baines. He's our boy."

Morrison had Lester's records brought in. He shook his head as he read. "He's seventeen. No disciplinary problem at all, but he's absent a lot. His grades are pretty bad. He failed in two subjects last semester."

Pete was looking over Morrison's shoulder. "Do you know him?"

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Morrison smiled wanly. "No. A principal knows fewer of the students than any teacher."

Torgeson lit a cigar. "This looks like the end of this one, Jim. You should look more cheerful."

I got to my feet. "I just don't like to see any boy get into trouble."

We drove to the Baines home. It was a medium-sized two-story house much like any of the others in the block.

Mr. Baines was tall and blue-eyed. The smile left his face when he opened the door. "You here again?"

"We'd like to talk to your son," Pete said. "Lester wasn't at school today. Is he sick?"

Baines' eyes flickered and then he said, "Why?"

Pete smiled faintly. "The same thing we were here for before."

Baines let us in reluctantly. "Lester's at the drug store. He'll be back in a few minutes."

Torgeson sat down on theavenport. "He isn't sick?"

Baines watched us narrowly. "He has a cold. I thought that it was best to keep him home today. But it wasn't so bad that he couldn't go down to the drug store for a coke."

Pete's face was bland. "Where was your boy at ten-thirty this morning?"

"He was right here," Baines snapped. "And he didn't make any phone calls."

"How do you know that?"

"This is my day off. I was with Lester all day."

"Where is your wife?"

"She's out shopping now. But she was here at ten-thirty. Lester didn't make any phone calls."

Pete smiled. "I hope so. And where was Lester at 1:20?"

"Right here," Baines said again. "My wife and I will swear to it." He frowned. "Were there two calls today?"

Pete nodded.

We sat in the living room waiting. Baines fidgeted nervously in his chair and then got up. "I'll be right back. I've got to check some of the upstairs screens."

Pete watched him leave the room and then turned to me. "You're letting me do all the talking, Jim."

"It doesn't take two for something like this, Pete."

He lit a cigar. "Well, everything turned out all right. We won't have to lose sleep on this one." He picked up the phone on a table at his elbow and listened. After awhile he put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Baines is on the upstairs extension. He's calling around. He doesn't know where his son is."

Pete kept listening and after awhile he smiled. "Now he's talking to his wife. She's at the supermarket. He's telling her about us. She's supposed to say that Lester was at home all day and made no phone calls."

I was looking out of the picture window, when a blond teenage boy turned up the walk and came toward the house.

Torgeson saw him too and put down the phone. "There's Lester now. We'll try to have a few fast words with him before his father comes down."

Lester Baines had a new sunburn and he carried a rolled-up towel under his arm. His normally cheerful face sobered when he stepped into the house and saw us.

"Where were you today, Lester?" Pete asked. "We know you weren't at school."

Lester swallowed. "I felt pretty rotten this morning and so I stayed home."

Pete indicated the towel under his arm. "Is there a wet pair of swimming trunks in there?"

Color came to Lester's face. "Well—around nine this morning everything seemed okay again. Maybe I didn't have a cold. I mean, maybe it was just an allergy or something and it cleared up." He took a deep breath. "So I decided

to go swimming, get some sun."

"All day? Didn't you get hungry?"

"I took along a few sandwiches."

"Who did you go with?"

"Nobody. Just me." He shifted uneasily. "Was there another one of those phone calls?"

Pete smiled. "If you were feeling so fit, why didn't you go to school in the afternoon?"

Lester's hands worked on the towel. "I was going to. But the next thing I knew it was after one o'clock and I couldn't have got back in time anyway." He went on lamely, "So I just decided to swim some more."

"If you were just going to be away for the morning, why did you take the sandwiches along?"

Lester's color deepened and he finally decided to tell the whole truth. "I didn't have a cold today. I just stayed away from school. Mom and Dad don't know that. There was going to be a civics test this morning and a history test in the afternoon, and I knew I'd flunk them both. I figured that if I studied tonight I'd be able to pass a make-up test tomorrow."

We heard the footsteps coming down the stairs and waited.

Baines stopped when he saw us with his son. "Don't tell them anything, Lester. Let me do the talking."

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"I'm afraid it's too late for that now," Pete said. "Your boy admitted that he wasn't in this house today."

Lester's voice showed panic. "I didn't make any of those calls. Honest, I didn't!"

Baines moved beside his son. "Why keep picking on Lester?"

"We're not picking on Lester," Pete said. "But we're reasonably certain that one of the students did the phoning. However, all of the calls came during times when classes were in session. And that means that only a student who was absent could have made them."

Baines wasn't impressed. "I'm sure that Lester wasn't the only student absent today."

Pete conceded that but went on. "The first of the three phone calls came eighteen days ago. We checked the attendance records at Stevenson at that time and found that ninety-six students had been absent at the time it was made. Sixty-two of those were boys and we talked to all of them—including your son. Your boy was home at that time with a cold . . . and alone. You were at work and your wife was attending the birthday party of a friend. However, your son denied making the call and we had to accept his word for that."

THE THIRD CALL

Lester appealed to his father. "I *didn't* make that bomb call, Dad. I wouldn't do such a thing."

Baines met his eyes for a moment and then turned back to us, his face expressionless.

Pete continued. "The second phone call came this morning at ten-thirty. We went over the attendance records again and discovered that only three boys had been absent on both this morning and on the day of the first phone call."

Baines' face showed a faint hope. "Are you checking the other two boys?"

"We were about to do that, but then another bomb scare call was made this afternoon and we were saved the trouble. We went back to the attendance records. One of our three suspects had returned for the afternoon session and therefore could not have phoned."

"What about the other boy?" Baines demanded.

"He's in a hospital."

Baines grasped at that. "Hospitals have phones."

Torgeson smiled faintly. "The boy caught scarlet fever while he was out of the state with his parents last week end. He's in a hospital five hundred miles away from here—and the phone calls were all local."

Baines turned to his son.

Lester paled. "You know I never lie to you, Dad."

"Of course you don't, son." But there was doubt on Baines' face.

The front door opened and an auburn-haired woman stepped inside. Her face was pale, but determined, and it took her a moment to get her breath. "I just stepped out for a moment to go shopping. Otherwise I was here all day. I'm sure I can account for every moment of Lester's time."

"Mom," Lester said miserably. "It's no use. I played hookey all day today and they know it."

Pete reached for his hat. "I'd like both of you to talk to your son tonight. I'm sure you can do that much better than we can." He put one of our cards on the table. "We'd like to see all three of you tomorrow morning at ten."

Outside, when he pulled our car away from the curb, Pete said, "We might find ourselves in for a hard time, if they decide to keep lying for their son."

"Suppose it wasn't somebody from the school?"

"I hope it wasn't. But you and I know that the chances are ninety-nine out of a hundred that it was." Pete sighed. "I don't like to see things like this. The bomb scare is bad enough, but what's happening to that family now is a lot worse."

I checked out at the station at five and got home a little after five-thirty.

My wife, Nora, was in the kitchen. "I read in the paper that there was another bomb scare at Stevenson this morning."

I kissed her. "And one this afternoon. That one happened too late to get into the paper."

She lifted the cover off the pot roast. "Did you find out who made them?"

I hesitated a moment. "Yes. I think we have."

"Who was it?"

"One of the students. A Lester Baines."

Her face showed pity. "What would make him do something like that?"

"I don't know. He hasn't admitted making the calls yet."

She studied me. "You look tired, Jim. Is something like this a little worse than usual?"

"Yes. A lot worse."

Her eyes showed worry, but she smiled. "Supper's just about ready. Why don't you call Dave? He's out in the garage trying to get that car of his to run."

Dave had the carburetor on the work bench. He looked up. "Hi, Dad. You look beat with the heat."

"It was a hard day."

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Dave had the gray eyes of his mother. He frowned. "Who was it?"

"A boy named Lester Baines. Do you know him?"

Dave peered down at the parts before him. "Sure."

"What kind of a boy is he?"

Dave shrugged. "I just know him to talk to. Seems like he's all right." He still frowned. "Did he admit making the calls?"

"No."

Dave picked up a screwdriver. "How did you narrow it down to him?"

I told him the method we had used.

Dave seemed to have trouble with an adjustment. "He's in a lot of trouble?"

"It might turn out that way."

"What do you think will happen to him?"

"I don't know. He's never been in trouble before. He might get probation."

Dave thought about that. "Maybe he did it as a joke. I mean nobody got hurt. All he did was stop school for awhile."

"A lot of people could have gotten hurt," I said. "It wouldn't have been a joke if there had been a panic."

Dave's face seemed slightly stubborn. "We have fire drills all the time. Everything goes off okay."

Yes, and that was what I had counted on when I called. I didn't want anyone to get hurt.

Dave put down his screwdriver. "Do *you* think Lester did it?"

"He could have."

Yes, Lester Baines could have made those first two phone calls. And I had made the third.

Dave was silent for awhile. "Dad, when the school got the first phone call, did you talk to all the boys who were absent?"

"Not myself. But the department got around to seeing all of them."

Dave had a faint wry smile. "I was absent that day, Dad. Nobody talked to me."

"I didn't think it was necessary, son."

And I hadn't. Other men's boys might have done such a thing, but not my boy. But now I waited.

Dave spoke reluctantly. "I was absent this morning, too."

"Yes," I said.

He met my eyes. "And that narrowed it down to how many boys?"

"Three," I said. "But we discovered that one of them couldn't possibly have made the call. He was in a hospital out of the state." I watched Dave. "And that left us with just two suspects. Lester Baines—and you."

Dave had trouble manufacturing a grin. "Some luck, huh? I

was at school this afternoon when the third phone call came and so that left just poor Lester."

"That's right. Poor Lester."

Dave licked his lips. "Is Lester's dad standing by him?"

"Of course. That's the way Dads are supposed to be."

Dave seemed to be perspiring slightly. He worked silently at the carburetor for a minute or two. Then he sighed and met my eyes. "Dad, I think you'd better take me down to headquarters. Lester didn't make those bomb calls. I did." He took a deep breath. "I did it as a joke. Just wanted to pep things up. I didn't mean anything wrong."

I hadn't wanted to hear those words, and yet now I felt a pride that I had a son who wouldn't let someone else suffer for his own mistakes.

"But, Dad, I just made the first two calls. Not the one this afternoon."

"I know. I made that particular call myself."

His eyes widened. And then he understood. "You tried to cover up for me?"

I smiled tiredly. "It was something I shouldn't have done, but a father doesn't always think too clearly when it involves his son. And I was hoping that it might turn out to be Lester after all."

Dave wiped his hands on a rag and there were a few moments of silence.

"I guess I ought to tell them I made all of the calls, Dad," Dave said. "There's no sense in all of us getting into trouble."

I shook my head. "Thanks, son. I'll tell them what I did."

And now when Dave looked at me, I had the feeling that somehow he was proud of me, too.

"We'll have supper first," I said. "And then we'll phone Lester's father. A half an hour won't make much difference."

Dave smiled wryly. "It will to Lester and his Dad."

I made the phone call as soon as we got back to the house.



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